

Testimony of the Reverend Jeff Liebmann
Minister, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Midland
Regarding SB 59

This proposed legislation is one of several recent bills that directly impact churches and other religious facilities. Some lawmakers feel that these bills protect religious freedom in this state. A few weeks ago, testifying before his own committee on one of this bills, Representative Kenneth Kurtz said, "...we need to make sure that government doesn't force these organizations to operate in a manner that violates their beliefs...We should never put faith-based organizations in a situation where they have to violate their faith in order to carry out their social mission."

Now, I testified against that particular piece of legislation, not because I disagree with the need to defend religious freedom, but because I believe Rep. Kurtz's reasoning for that instance was faulty. So, to stress the relevance of bills such as SB 59 to the issue of religious freedom, let me reference Thomas Jefferson, the father of our legal concept of religious freedom. The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom was written by Jefferson and enacted into the state's law in 1786. In part, the Statute reads:

Whereas, Almighty God hath created the mind free;

*That all attempts to influence it...beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness,
and therefore are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our
religion...*

That the impious presumption of legislators...who, being themselves but fallible...men have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible...

That our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions any more than our opinions in physics or geometry...

That to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency is a dangerous fallacy which... destroys all religious liberty...

And finally, that Truth is great, and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons free argument and debate...

SB 59 promotes the further dissemination of the most heinous tools of violence and human injury in our society into our most sacred spaces – our schools, our day care centers, and of course our churches and religious sanctuaries. This bill tells religious communities that the decision of the state to expand the free reign of gun owners matters more than centuries-old traditions and beliefs, and more than the moral tenets of religious people in search of places safe from the sorrows and concerns of the secular world. And this bill threatens our religious freedom.

And as Jefferson asserted, religious freedom is not about legislators imposing their particular moral and religious beliefs on the populace, or acting as agents of those who would have government restrict the free practice of religion. Religious freedom is

not about imposing the will of fallible human beings on the citizenry, but freeing us to make their own informed choices and seek Truth in an atmosphere free from coercion and violence. To protect religious freedom, then we should protect our schools and churches, where the presence of guns will only increase the likelihood of overt acts against peace and order.

Personally, if the powers of the universe granted me the capacity, I would eradicate every handgun from the face of the earth. I loathe handguns and the evil made more easily committed by their possession. But I realize that I do not have that power, nor can I even prevent them from existing in our streets. But I can fight for stronger laws regarding their purchase and registration. I can advocate for sterner measures regarding their use. And I can plead for you to protect important areas of our communities from their presence.

I will never allow handguns through the doors I was called to protect. I believe that handguns in my church are an anathema to my moral beliefs and to the religious tenets of my faith. Handguns present a vile assault on the universal religious principles of love and peace. A handgun presence in a religious facility is a depraved violation of the sacred protection our sanctuaries provide.